

# INCLUDING NEW PEOPLE IN YOUR CONGREGATION

*Dorothy Henderson*

Most church members believe they have a friendly church! In many cases this is a myth. It is hard work for newcomers to become connected in a congregation. Many people make one or two attempts, then give up and walk away.

The tendency to exclude people is seldom intentional. It happens because churches don't take the time to think through their patterns of inclusion. How can we do a better job of including new people?<sup>1</sup>

We need to intentionally expand the care system of the congregation.

## STEP 1

Put together a “Welcoming Committee” or “Newcomers Committee”.<sup>2</sup> Who should be on it? People with characteristics like these: somewhat extroverted, socially involved, self-confident, committed, a global perspective, well informed.

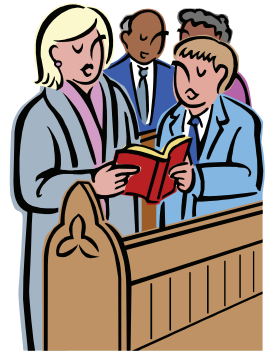
## STEP 2

**Prepare welcome bags/kits.** It is important to be ready for visitors and guests. Gather together a few print resources about your congregation—a brief history, a list of programs and ministries, a list of important phone numbers, outline of special services held through the year and so on. **Prepare a children's bag/kit** as well. Put in puzzles, stories, book marks and an outline of children's programming.

## STEP 3

**Spot newcomers and speak to them.** This may seem like an obvious thing—but many visitors report that they attend worship and no one speaks to them, although some people may nod and say, “Good morning.”

In small and medium sized churches the Welcoming Committee will find spotting newcomers a relatively easy task. A member or members can wait near the entrance and greet newcomers. After worship, approach the newcomer and engage in friendly conversation. (Many greeters use the “five minute rule,” speaking only to people they don't know very well for the first five minutes.) If greeters are unsure whether or not a person is new, simply say, “Are you a visitor to our congregation or is that just that I don't know you?” It is very important to make this type of personal contact on the first visit and, if possible, to introduce them to someone with whom they may have something in common.



1. Some ideas in this model were adapted from *Evangelism in the Small Church*, James Cushman, Vital Faith Resources, 2004.
2. Call this committee whatever suits your congregation. You could also use a title like “St. Andrew's Welcome Wagon.”

If visitors are willing, invite them to fill out a newcomer's card so the minister can follow up on their visit. Simply say, "Are you interested in filling out a visitor's card so we have the opportunity to introduce you to our church?" It may be that they will say, "No, thanks. I'm just 'shopping around,'" but others may welcome further contact. It is quite effective for a lay person to follow up. After all, everyone expects the minister to do this, but a layperson, who gives up his/her time and is enthusiastic about the church, will have an even greater effect.

#### STEP 4

The most important thing to consider around inclusion is **communication flow**. As a committee, do the following:

- a) List on paper the names of all families.
- b) Group people according to families, extended families and close friends.
- c) In each of the groupings, circle the names of the key communicators.
- d) Go through your original list in (a) and write down the names of people who are not part of ongoing communication flow within a group identified under (b). (Most congregations find that almost one-fourth of the membership is excluded from the information flow.)
- e) Decide how the people identified in (d) can be included in a communication group.
- f) When new people enter the church, put them **immediately** into someone's communication group.
- g) When anything about the church needs to be communicated, make a phone call or send an e-mail to the key communicators and ask them to let their family and friends know.

#### STEP 5

Include new people by giving them an **orientation to the history, tradition, values and life of the congregation**. Designate someone in the church as the oral historian.

Make this an event full of story-telling, laughter and food. It should include a tour of the building, talking about the pictures, symbols and changes that have happened over the years. This puts new people in touch with the important oral traditions and values of the congregation.

#### STEP 6

If possible, **include newcomers in a program/ministry** as soon as possible. Ask them: "How would you like to be involved in the life of this church? What interests you?" Give them a list of optional ways in which they could be involved. It is possible that some may say, "I just want to attend worship." Respect their wish, but you might, for instance, ask if they would be willing to pray for others during the week.

#### STEP 7

The most difficult point—and probably the last point of inclusion—is to involve new people in the decision-making and power structure of the congregation. The transfer of authority to a new person occurs slowly and often only after newcomers have proven their love for and loyalty to the church. The Welcoming Committee can assist in this process by helping newcomers to ease into lesser positions of authority and reminding them that trust will grow the longer they are in the congregation.

*The question arises in Presbyterian churches. Is this communication flow not the responsibility of the elder to his/her district? Of course, this communication also happens with session. It is particularly effective if the minister contacts elders about something that all the church should know about and the elders contact each member of their district. However, especially in small churches and small centres, the natural networks—school, work, shopping, the post office—are points of natural and easy communication.*

*By all means, use all possible communication systems—natural, family/friend groupings, elders districts.*